Christianity in the Making: Beginning from Jerusalem

The Eighth Part of Dunn's encyclopedia (it truly is encyclopedic) centers on the Apostle Paul, his life, his strategy, his churches, his missions. Quite traditionally, Dunn imagines Paul's last efforts to have been conducted in Rome, where he (apparently) died.

This large section (pp. 497-956!) contains as well as a good bit of chronological investigation, what can only be best described as 'mini' introductions to 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, (3rd and 4th Corinthians too), and of course, Romans. All of which are, again, fairly traditional in their orientation.

That isn't to suggest that Dunn doesn't offer along the way some really fascinating observations. He does. For instance, he offers a simple chart which gives the reader an idea of how long it would have taken Paul to go from Jerusalem to Antioch (15 days to 4 weeks) or from North Galatia to Troas (20 days to 6 weeks). But this he gleans from Jewett.

He also notes, in a somewhat ironic twist considering the massive space he devotes to Paul, that 'Following the consultation or council at Jerusalem, Luke's focus on Paul becomes even tighter and more exclusive. That is certainly regrettable, since it leaves other parts of the earliest Christian outreach and expansion in the dark' (p. 519). Were it not for Acts, the Pauline period too would be rather dark. Were it not for Dunn's apparent unwavering belief in the historical accuracy of Acts, he would be forced to confess that most of early Christianity lies in the dark.

Dunn's admiration of Paul shines through on nearly every page. He says, right up front, 'The fact is that Paul is the single most important figure to emerge in the first generation of the new messianic sect' (p. 519). But is that really so? Paul certainly had his many detractors and even had to be defended by the author of 2 Peter! To be sure, Paul was the most important early Christian to Augustine and through him to Luther and through him to most German scholarship. But it remains unproven that he was the most important Christian in the first generation of believers. In fact, John was probably equally important and in some circles undoubtedly more important.

In other words, Dunn has been infected with Paulitis – an infection he caught from Augustine and Luther. But this is an infection which may not have been widespread at all in 1st century Rome or Jerusalem.

Still, to be fair, Dunn may well correct this pro-Paul imbalance in the third volume of his work.

Another, and perhaps the best, aspect of Dunn's tome is his inclusion of archaeological and sociological evidence for the Pauline churches. Pp. 602- 637 are chocked full of fascinating details which open windows on Paul's world in a most agreeable way. This is, to me, the best part of the book.

The second most engaging portion is Dunn's discussion of 'Paul's Miracles' (pp. 770-773). This isn't the sort of fare one usually finds in historical volumes. How, after all, can miracles be historically verified? 'The belief that spiritual power can be conveyed through physical means is at the root of Christian teaching on the sacraments, and of healing ministry more generally, as well as of the long tradition of relics within Christianity' (p. 771), says Dunn. Wrongly. The sacraments have nothing at all to do with the transmission of power- they are demonstrations of Grace. And relics were a much later development in Christian piety. Dunn is reading into the 'miraculous' later distortions held by a minority of believers.